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Airport safety group backs biometrics

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A Silicon Valley group charged with identifying technological answers to security problems at airports has released a report recommending the adoption of several high-tech products to improve passenger safety.

The Blue Ribbon Task Force on Aviation Security and Technology was formed by Silicon Valley Rep. Mike Honda and San Jose, Calif., Mayor Ron Gonzales to take advantage of the region's proximity to a diverse group of tech companies.

The task force suggested airport safety could be improved through several methods including: installing biometric identifiers to track airport employees, adding GPS devices to monitor vehicles traveling in secure airport areas, improving cockpit access technology, and upgrading the communications network so airports can communicate more effectively with each other and with outside organizations including law enforcement.

It suggested testing new products at the nearby Mineta San Jose International Airport.

However, the group acknowledged that technology isn't the only solution to the nation's airport safety woes. It also said that many companies and government agencies already have adopted technological security measures in the wake of Sept. 11.

"The task force views its technology-drive proposals as the next step in what must be viewed as a long process of technology research, development and application," the report stated.

The task force is made up of people with wide-ranging interests in security issues, including Bill Coleman, chairman of software maker BEA Systems; Capt. Dan Ashby, chair of the California Airline Pilots Association; Larry Wansley, managing director of corporate security for American Airlines; and Bob McCashin, CEO of biometric company Identix. Symantec CEO John Thompson led the group.

In their report, task force members said it was important to balance safety with respect for privacy and civil liberties. The task force waded through 41 airport security proposals and whittled them down to six options before its 100-day deadline.

The report comes as airports are scrambling to comply with the new Aviation and Transportation Security Act, a law that, among other things, calls for more sky marshals, enhanced airport security systems and improved baggage-screening systems at airports by the end of this year.

However, a few airports already have run into problems with new security technology. For example, some airports have removed face recognitions systems installed after September 11 because of glitches.